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ABSTRACT

Two exercises that can be used with journalism students to help them clarify and think through the editorial process are the repertory grid and the coorientation model. A technique developed in England by the followers of psychologist George Kelly, the repertory grid asks students to rank ten or twelve authors on criteria such as social acceptability, professional effectiveness, and liberalism-conservatism. The student then decides which authors are closest and which are farthest from his or her "ideal self" and "actual self." The follow-up discussion clarifies the issues involved in defining oneself (or a more detailed analysis is achieved through the use of a computer). The second exercise, the coorientation model, requires students to rank or rate story titles or leads according to interest or probable readership for themselves and for a clearly defined audience. These ratings are then compared with hypothetical play in editing a publication or with actual survey results of audience ratings. Effective use of these two techniques involves consistent discussion and evaluation on the individual level, along with statistical analyses. (Author/MAI)

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SOME EDITORIAL GAMES FOR THE MAGAZINE EDITING OR WRITING CLASS

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Ordinarily, we play games for personal entertainment. But teachers have long recognized that games also can serve to stimulate thought and learning. This paper describes two kinds of "editorial games"--along with variations--which the authors use in a variety of classes. Both games stem from well-known theories about communication processes and serve the twin purposes of stimulating understanding and introspection.

The first game uses the so-called Repertory Grid, a technique developed in England but based on the "personal construct" work of the late George Kelly, an American. Its principal purpose is to help students assess their professional values and priorities.

The second type of exercise draws on the coorientation model proposed by Theodore Newcomb and later elaborated by McLeod and Chaffee, among others. Ratings of hypothetical stories allow the student to compare news values with actual publication decisions, or with audience ratings.

In order to understand how, or why, either game is played, a little background needs to precede the tale of our experiences. We will deal initially with the less elaborate of the two, the Repertory Grid (from now on, simply "the grid.").

Although he was not the first to observe it, Kelly has made perhaps the most elaborate modern explanation of how a person makes sense of his world.[1] The basic theory says that we see the world through a series of "constructs," or judgmental roadmaps that guide us in situations, events and observations. Another metaphor might be the pigeonholes in an old-fashioned editor's rolltop desk. In order to avoid total confusion with our experiences, we order each by placing it in a predefined niche or category. This filing takes place for what we <u>expect</u> to happen as well. Kelly's fundamental postulate is that we constantly make predictions about the world around us. Usually, we remain unaware that we are making these predictions; and we remain equally ignorant of the criteria on which these predictors are based. The grid was suggested by Kelly as a means to lifting that veil.

Development and testing of the grid remained until the work in the 1960's of two English psychologists, David Bannister and J.M.M. Mair of Bexley Hospital in Kent. Initially they used the grid to help sort out the confused perceptions of schizophrenics and other psychiatric patients.[2] Others have since extended their work to a variety of other populations: television viewers,[3] adolescents[4] and prisoners[5] among them. Consultants in industry and politics alike have used the grid in a kind of "values clarification." The technique is probably best described in Bannister and Mair's book The Evaluation of Personal Constructs.[6]

The grid is nothing more than an attempt to have the subject sketch out a universe of values on a specified matrix, using defined stimuli. The instructor can then examine that induced picture and work with the student to examine the meanings therein. Although a computer program has been developed to look at correlation coefficients within the grid[7], "eyeballing" the product with an intelligent student can provide sufficient insights for most purposes.

The size of the grid most often used is 12/by/12. On the left and righthand margins are twelve pairs of dichotomous categories or "constructs" similar to those often used in semantic differential procedures. Usually the investigator provides half to two-thirds of these pairs, using known "old reliables." Useful examples for journalism students include:

SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE/SOCIALLY UNACCEPTABLE
INNOVATIVE, LIKES CHANGE/TRADITION-BOUND
EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONALLY/INEFFECTIVE PROFESSIONALLY
ACTUAL-LIKE I AM/AS I AM NOT
IDEAL-AS I WOULD LIKE TO BE/AS I WOULD NOT LIKE TO BE

The student is asked to fill in the remaining pairs, using those provided as examples but not dictates of the types needed. Thus, other salient constructs may appear.

With the construct pairs arranged in two vertical columns flanking the page, the student is then asked to arrange a number of situations or persons (usually 12) on the horizontal spectrum between them. We have found it most effective to use familiar names in journalism or literature. The student is assured that there is no wrong way to do the grid as long as all spaces are filled in and no names (or their corresponding letters or numbers) are repeated on any individual line. A time limit--usually 20 to 30 minutes--is set so that the student can work carefully but without time for worry or undue reflection about consistency or meaning.

Only after the student completes the grid does the instructor explain the meaning and usefulness of the game. Usually grids from past classes are used for this purpose to avoid embarassment or hasty judgments on the part of the instructor/interpreter. It is important that the student leaves the class understanding that the grid is a tool for understanding professional development, not diagnosing ills real or imagined.

We have used the grid principally in magazine writing and mass media and society classes. In the former, the names suggested are usually well-known stylists (Hemingway, Dickens, Bellow, Tom Wolfe) or well-published practitioners (Talese, Steinem, Bagdikian) with equally well-discussed professional values. In the mass media setting, we usually use journalists who have participated in previously examined ethical situations (Woodward and Bernstein, Rather, Larry Flynt).

Not surprisingly, the student writer often produces grids that are highly representative of his writing models--and often of his good and bad habits. On examination, the student can be made to see how these models may contribute to his writing performance and his aspirations. "Why did you define Gloria Steinem as more effective professionally than Tom (not Thomas) Wolfe?" The student's answer to that question usually reveals an important value that has remained unvoiced and perhaps unrealized until now. Although office conferences are the best time to examine the grid, the discussions usually carry over into the next classes.

A comparison of the grids filled out by those in the basic writing class and the grids of the same students in Advanced Magazine Writing is often revelatory. Students are able to see how their values have changed as their interests and experiences grew. No student can possibly remember how the grid was filled out the first time, and the changes produced are normally not the result of chance.

In mass media, we have used the grid as part of the final examination. Students are then asked to relate their grid to their professional values as related to their judgments of those persons named and ranked. This also can be the topic of office conferences and class discussions. However, the grid also has proven useful as a capstone for a quarter's self-examination of values and ethics.

As mentioned, the primary purpose of the grid in this context is to stimulate self-examination in areas often

considered an impenetrable "black box." Caution should be used in dictating meanings to the student. In particular, values not present on the extremes of the construct pairs are difficult to interpret. Those closest to the middle of the spectrum probably represent little difference amongst them.

In contrast to the work done on psychiatric groups, we have no evidence that the grid in normal persons such as journalism students has anything other than heuristic value. However, we are collecting series and sets of grids to attempt to see if meaningful value patterns might someday be established. Until then the grid teaches 1:1.

Many writers fear that the "creative flame" might be snuffed out if too finely examined. Our experience with the grid suggests that, at least for student journalists, writing can become stronger as it becomes less mysterious and more self-confident.

The coorientation games we have been experimenting with are of three kinds. All seem to have value in teaching editing. Each permits a student to get a taste of applied theory while saying: "Hey, I did that. I wonder why?"

The games center on two questions asked by a thoughtful editor, particularly on magazines but increasingly also on newspapers. First, how closely does my thinking about editorial matter resemble my audience's? And second, if there is a difference, which perspective (mine or my audience's) is most important?

Before describing these games, we should consider why such questions need classroom attention.

First, in the absence of contrary evidence, it's natural to assume others define the world pretty much as you do.[8] Newspaper-oriented editing instructors may unintentionally encourage a lack of thought about audiences. Such concepts as balance (hard vs. soft news, local vs. state vs. national-international) and news elements (consequence, conflict, human interest, novelty, etc.) call attention to the message and the event reported more than to audience interests and needs.

In the "real world" of journalism, space and time pressures often preclude thought and study about audiences.[9] Such

neglect also may exist where a particular job involves contact with news sources but little thought about overall news play.[10]

Unfortunately, high congruency (assuming an editor's audience thinks as the editor does) pays off only where there is also agreement. In plain English, you can accurately assume that an audience thinks as you do only if, in fact, it does. And journalists aren't typical of the total population. Johnstone and his colleagues found them to be well educated and, on the whole, from "established and predominant cultural groups in society."[11] Also, critics such as Mayer[12] accuse news people of stressing political perspectives to the exclusion of others.

The second question asks whether, assuming some difference between the two, one should follow his audience, his "own nose," neither or both. This lies at the heart of much debate and change in contemporary journalism.

Norman Cousins has argued cogently for the "own nose" approach in editing an opinion magazine. If a publication is to have a character or a message, it must come from the editor's mind and heart. Without such a focus, few magazines could thrive.[13]

In a different vein, recent research suggests that we rely on the media to set our agendas--to help us decide what topics and issue merit attention.[14] Clearly an editor cannot help set his audience's agenda while following it slavishly. This would be a classic case of the dog chasing its own tail.

On the other hand, rather powerful forces are calling for audience study as a basis for choosing all media content and approach. The "happy talk" format in TV news, long widespread specialized magazine practice of analyzing markets, and the current concern (if not panic) about boosting newspaper circulation[15] all seem to point in this direction.

Intelligent editorial decisions must strike a balance between following the audience and retaining one's autonomy. Also, a young editor needs to note other factors. A very important tax story may interest much of the audience (and for that matter, the editor) very little but still deserve fairly big play. And while some believers in the press as watchdog may think otherwise, a growing body of literature shows sources do play a role in editorial decisions.[16]

In sum, an editing class should emphasize that a) journalist and audience perspectives may differ, b) where they do, intelligent editing draws on both, and c) other factors such as news sources and story consequence also play a part. The exercises described next focus on these points.

A. EDITOR-AND-AUDIENCE GAME

Here we begin with a batch of news stories or leads. About 18-to-20 are typically chosen from recent magazines and/or newspapers. These include a variety of articles (hard vs. soft; local vs. state vs. national vs. international; human interest vs. foreign policy, etc.). McLeod et al. suggest at least 20-to-25 leads or item titles may be desirable.[17] But our experience indicates even 20 may be hard to handle, especially for a general population sample.

People are asked to rank news leads or rate them on a 5-point or 7-point scale. Ranking is more time-consuming and may require finer discrimination among stories than a journalist or reader typically does or can achieve. However, where feasible, a complete rank ordering provides a detailed picture of editorial preferences.

In one variety of this game, we first ask students to rate or rank the leads from separate perspectives:

- --their own as news consumers, resigning their role as editors. We call this the EO (editor's own) rating.
- --the audience's as they estimate it. This is the EA rating (audience viewpoint as perceived by an editor).

Then we may use a city directory or map to draw a general population sample from town or campus and have each student interview perhaps five people. In the interview, respondents rate or rank leads as to general interest or probability of reading, creating still a third rating--the AO (audience's own).

A class of 15-to-20 can cover 75-to-100 respondents quite easily. Summing ratings or rank scores (and ranking the summed ranks if they are used), we come up with an overall AO data set quite easily. Chaffee and others have noted problems with aggregating coorientational data in research.[18] However, the technique seems useful in classroom work as long as person-to-person variation in assessment is noted carefully by the class.

This done, we compute three coorientation indices for each class member, using the product-moment correlation coefficient (r) with rating data or the Spearman rank-correlation coefficient (r_s) with ranked responses:

--Congruency ($r_{EO,EA}$), the degree of resemblance between an editor's own assessment and that which he attributes to the audience.
--Agreement ($r_{EO,AO}$), the similarity between editor's own and audience's own viewpoints.
--Accuracy ($r_{EA,AO}$), indicating how close the editor has come to predicting actual audience rankings.[19]

With a little computer work, each student can have his own indices within a day or two of data collection. This provides grist for discussion. If accuracy is low, what stories proved most troublesome and why? If agreement was low, what differences between editor and audience backgrounds may account for this? And if congruency was higher or lower than needed for high accuracy, what does this suggest for future news judgment behavior?

This version of the editor-and-audience game takes time and effort. And it's not likely to generate enough audience data to be definitive. But it can introduce precision journalism and show how it relates to day-to-day editing problems.

A quicker and easier variant can be completed in one class session. Students are divided randomly into pairs, each including an interviewer (I1) and an interviewee (I2). Each pair discusses news values for 10 or 15 minutes, with I1 asking I2 open-ended questions about the latter's media interests. I1 is asked not to give clues about his or her interests, and I2 does not ask about them.

After the interview, each person gives his or her own ranking or ratings, and his or her own best estimate of the partner's responses. Accuracy scores are then computed for all, showing rather graphically on the board how a given score really amounts to a sum of differences between two sets of scores.

If the interviewing helps, interviewers should predict more accurately than interviewees. A quick check of the class often reveals that the interviewing doesn't make much difference. Follow-up discussion typically shows that it's not easy to identify and get information helpful in "psyching out" audiences. Interview questions tend to focus on broad categories like economics or human interest and these

aren't very helpful. For example, a self-proclaimed foreign affairs buff will often downgrade a particular story from abroad. The complexity of news assessment became especially apparent one day when a student explained that he'd given high play to a story on Rosalyn Carter because Rosalyn resembled his mother!

In follow-up discussion I1 and I2 can focus on the two or three stories about which they disagree most. And they ask why--what perceptions of the stories and setting led to differences.

Audience ratings have limited validity[20] and take time to collect. Fortunately, games played without them may shed some light. An editor can consider the audience only after estimating its interests. Thus,in light of its central role, EA merits study with or without audience-own data, as in the remaining exercises.

B. EDITOR-PUBLICATION GAME
This exercise involves taking a list of stories which have broken recently and gauging relative emphasis in a local paper or magazine. Content data, perhaps in the form of Budd attention scores,[21] can be compared with each student's own EO and EA profiles. Also, an editor from the publication studied can come in and comment on specific decisions.

This approach introduces live editorial decision makers and their products. Without such "real world" journalism, students are likely to lose enthusiasm.

C. EDITOR ONLY GAME
Here we begin with a three-sided model much like the traditional coorientation diagram. EO and EA are obtained much as before, and congruency is computed.

However, in place of audience data, we ask the editor to assume he or she is editing a paper or magazine and must choose among the stories presented. The editor is asked to rate or rank these as to play warranted. This yields a news-judgment (NJ) profile.

With these data in hand, we can construct two additional indices for each student editor:

-- $r_{(EO,NJ)}$, an index of <u>autonomy</u>. Where the NJ and EO ratings or rankings are similar, an editor appears to be "following his own nose."
-- $r_{(EA,NJ)}$, an index of <u>followership</u>. A high score reflects an apparent tendency to "think as you think the audience does" when making content choices.[22]

It is interesting to subtract one's autonomy score from his followership tally. If the resulting number is positive, the editor emphasizes followership more than autonomy. If the number if negative, autonomy holds sway.

A computer makes it possible to give each student his own scores quickly. This can generate discussion about why autonomy was high or low and what specific stories seemed most crucial in the choice between autonomy and followership.

Time permitting, one can generate autonomy and followership scores early in the term, then later, to check the impact of various educational experiences (market analysis in a feature writing class, audience surveys, study of marketing-related textbooks, etc.). We're inclined to feel that an editing class should lead to:

--Declining congruency ratings. A student should be encouraged to look for possible differences in viewpoint between self and audience.

--Mildly declining autonomy and increasing followership as audience study becomes more salient. As noted above, however, too much movement from autonomy to followership may be cause for alarm.

It may be instructive to compare newspaper majors in a class with those in public relations and magazines. Followership scores may run a bit higher and congruency scores lower in the latter two sequences, since basic courses there tend to emphasize audience study. This is only conjecture, of course. But it can spice up the study of professional norms and practices.

These games obviously won't make one an accomplished editor. They are no substitute for intellectual curiousity, alertness and reading widely. However, they do call attention to aspects of media decision-making which often escape attention.

The task in all the games described is basically "journalist, know thyself." In an era of increased public demand for media responsibility, such efforts seem particularly appropriate. Further, such games might be effective as mid-career training adjuncts. Practicing journalists become trapped in routine and have little time for reflection and self-analysis. Games such as ours might be appropriate for short courses and symposia or for discussions before such groups as SPJ/SDX, the American Society of Magazine Editors or the American Business Press.

It is the thought and analysis, the discussion and the teaching engendered by these games that is important. They are designed far more to raise questions than to answer them. This is a natural fruit of behavioral science research that too rarely is used in the classroom.

We feel that such games as these have no losers. The thinking student may win a great deal. Moreover, games can be real fun. And as any teacher knows, that can do no harm.

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1. George A. Kelly, The Psychology of Personal Constructs (New York: W.W. Norton, 1955), also available in paperback as A Theory of Personality.

2. David Bannister, "Personal Construct Theory: A Summary and Experimental Paradigm," Acta Psychologica 20: 2, 104 (1962).

3. Robert R. Monaghan, "The Repertory Grid: Application to Ascertaining Viewer Needs," Experimental Behavioral Research, 6: 1, 38-46 (February, 1972).

4. "Developmental Changes, Childhood to Adolescence," Child Development, 48: 1467-74,(December, 1977).

5. "Changes in Detention Center Trainees," British Journal of Criminology, 17: 274-79 (July, 1977).

6. David Bannister and J.M.M. Mair, The Evaluation of Personal Constructs (London: Academic Press, 1968).

7. REPGRD Program 05/18/72, available from CPS Library, Ohio State University, Columbus.

8. David K. Berlo, The Process of Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 122-24.

9. Walter Gieber, "Across the Desk: A Study of 16 Telegraph Editors," Journalism Quarterly, 33: 432-42 (Fall, 1956); Paul B. Snider, "Mr. Gates Revisited; A 1966 Version of the 1949 Case Study," Journalism Quarterly, 44: 419-27 (Autumn, 1967).

10. Jeremy Tunstall, Journalists at Work (London: Constable and Co., Ltd., 1971), 34-36.

11. John W.C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski and William W. Bowman, The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 25-26.

12. Martin Mayer, "Default at the New York Times," Columbia Journalism Review, 14: 16-20 (January-February, 1976).

13. Norman Cousins, speech delivered at Ohio University, Athens, May 7, 1971.

14. Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs, The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1977).

15. Philip Meyer, "In Defense of the Marketing Approach," Columbia Journalism Review, 26: 60-62 (January-February, 1976).

16. Edward Jay Epstein, Between Fact and Fiction: The Problem of Journalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 3-18; William L. Rivers, The Adversaries: Politics and the Press (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 91-133; Leon V. Sigal, Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsgathering (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1973), 101-15; Tunstall, op. cit., 160-201.

17. Jack M. McLeod, Lee B. Becker and William R. Elliott, "Exploration of Methodological Problems in Coorientation Research," Paper presented to Theory and Methodology Division, Assn. for Education in Journalism, Carbondale, Ill., August 1972.

18. Steven H. Chaffee, "Pseudo-Data in Communication Research," Paper presented to Theory and Methodology Division, Assn. for Education in Journalism, Columbia, S.C., August 1971.

19. One needs to be on guard here for a statistical artifact. Accuracy may be less than genuine if it stems from both high agreement and high congruency (that is, projecting your own view, an easy process, will work if there happens to be high agreement). This can be controlled by partial correlation, controlling for EO ratings while computing accuracy scores. Also, to meet assumptions of the product-moment correlation procedure, a near-normal distribution can be created by instructing respondents to assign high ratings to roughly one-fifth or one-fourth of the stories, low ratings to a like number.

20. At least two factors seem to dictate humility here. First, unless the exercise becomes a top-priority class project, sample size is likely to be too small for high reliability. And second, there is little evidence of a high correlation between what a person believes will interest him and what he will actually read, watch or listen to.

21. Richard W. Budd, Robert K. Thorp and Lewis Donohew, Content Analysis of Communications (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), 35-36.

22. Control through partial correlation is wise here as noted in footnote 19. EA ratings can be partialled in computing autonomy, EO with followership.

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